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Distributed Intensities: Whiteness, Mestizaje and the Logics of Mexican Racism

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Abstract

By analysing *racist moments*, this article engages with debates about the existence of racism in Mexico and how whiteness, as an expression of such racism, operates. It draws on empirical research that explores Mexican women's understandings of mestizaje (mixed-race discourses) and experiences of racism. It assesses how racism is lived, its *distributed intensity*, within the specific *racist logics* that organise everyday social life. I build upon arguments that Latin American *racist logics* emerge from the 'lived experience' of mestizaje (Wade 2005) and its historical development (as a political ideology and a complex configuration of national identity, Knight 1990). Mestizaje enables whiteness to be experienced as both normalised and ambiguous, not consistently attached to the (potentially) whiter body, but as a site of legitimacy and privilege.

Key Words: Whiteness, Mestizaje, Racelessness, Racism, Mexico

Introduction

This article explores whiteness as an expression of racism and as the location of privilege in a context where racial dynamics are not explicit or publicly acknowledged. I consider the case of Mexico and the specific forms racism takes in this context where the prevailing racial ideology is dominated by mestizaje.

Mestizaje, a term mostly used in relation to the Americas, broadly refers to two correlated sets of ideas: on the one hand, processes of 'race' mixture, that is, 'mixture of both human substance and culture' (Wade 2001, 849) that emerged with

the sixteenth-century Spanish invasion and subsequent colonial period (1510-1810); and on the other, discourses of inclusion and belonging to the nation. Here I explore the relevance of *mestizaje* for understanding contemporary racial politics in Mexico. I concentrate on the implications *mestizaje* has for revealing the multiplicity and pervasiveness of racist practices, racial privilege and processes of racialisation. With this aim, throughout the article I engage with three interrelated sets of concerns that have been raised by various scholars: a) the particularity of racism in Latin America; b) the relevance of whiteness as a site of privilege; and, c) the need to unpack how racism works at the level of the everyday.

Warren and Twine point out that it is increasingly clear how Latin America exemplifies 'racially stratified societies in which persons of colour are actively participating in the naturalization and reproduction of the racial order' (2002, 541). They call for further research that seriously engages with, and confronts, a situation where 'nonwhites tend *not* to perceive racism, are deeply racist, and thus are central to the maintenance of white supremacy' (2002, 550). Similarly, Goldberg argues that in contrast to contexts such as the USA or South Africa, Latin America strives for 'euro-mimesis', which 'promoted the supposed ascent from indigeneity into whiteness' (2009, 217). This also means 'that both what could be imagined as the national community and the interests the state could represent were configured in terms of and around the structures of whiteness' (2009, 217). This article then addresses these concerns by critically engaging with the task of understanding the mechanisms of racism in Mexico and offering an innovative analysis of *how whiteness is a core-structuring motif obscured by the homogenising racial logic of mestizaje*. In other contexts, such a project has been at its most effective when explored in the realm of the everyday. Essed, for example, has pointed to the relevance of understanding the minutia of 'everyday racism' (2002), focusing on 'white' people's racism towards 'black' peoples (in the USA, The Netherlands and South Africa). However, in Mexico and most of Latin America, racial and ethnic relations are characterised by a relative positioning of a variety of racialised bodies and identities that problematises the well-rehearsed white/black dichotomy. This article offers a reading of what racism 'feels like' in a context that not only denies it,

but where people do not recognise themselves as racialised, there is no public discourse about it and each painful racist encounter is strikingly shifting and slippery. My proposal is to make sense of mestizaje *simultaneously* as a hegemonic political ideology, a social and racial promise of equality, *and* a racialised experience, or *racist logic* that distributes privilege and exclusion within everyday life. I am interested in proposing that mestizaje is not only a site of privilege which is continuously normalised, it is also deeply ambiguous, that is, it is characterized by being limited, contradictory *and* conditional.

The argument I propose builds upon the premise that *racism does exist in Mexico* and that it is a phenomenon in need of exposure and analysis. This affirmation is a necessary one in a society that has built its most sacred national rationale upon the idea of mestizaje as a way of surpassing racial distinctions. It is striking how the term 'race' and the signalling of racist practices are constantly been avoided in Mexican academic, media, official and popular discourses. When it does appear is in relation to Indígena¹ populations, the newly 'recognised' populations of African-descent, called Afro-Mexicans or Afro-Mestizos (Aguirre Beltrán 1972 [1946] , Añorve Zapata 2008, Hoffmann and Rodríguez 2007, Martínez Montiel 1994, Velázquez Gutiérrez and Correa 2005), or 'black' people from abroad. More importantly, the explicit naming and tackling of racism in Mexico is commonly lost amid efforts against 'discrimination', a term that suffers from both its broad definition *and* its limited focus on the exclusion of Indígena and Afro-Mexican peoples. One possible reason for this is that such initiatives are mostly obscured under polite uses of ethnicity-related terminology which mainly refer to vague ideas of 'cultural differences'. Thus, for example, issues about perceptions, emotions and values assigned to different physical human bodies (Ahmed 1998, 2000, 2004b, Fanon 1991 (1967)), about class distinction and disgust (Bourdieu 1984, Skeggs 1997, 2004, Tyler 2008) and the configuration of these with gender distinctions (Bettie 2003, Lorde 2007) are rarely

¹ *Indígena(s)* is the name given to the indigenous population of Mexico, nowadays comprising 56 different ethnic groups. Some authors use the more traditional 'india/o (s)', which has a clear pejorative connotation in its everyday use. Although both terms (*indígena/India*) are problematic I have decided to use *indígena* as a more 'respectful' word. I discuss the problematic of both terms elsewhere (Moreno Figueroa 2006)

acknowledged.

Racism then, is a pertinent term to use for the Mexican context. I understand racism as diverse practices of discrimination and exclusion based on ideas of inherent 'racial' superiority that normalise control, domination and exclusion of one group over others, while legitimating privilege and oppression. A key feature of the way racism has pervaded social life in Mexico is the relationship between racist practices and ideas about 'race'. Racist practices have been discursively separated from the particular understandings of 'race' from which they have emanated, acquiring dynamics of their own. I call these complex dynamics 'racist logics' and specifically in the Mexican case, 'mestizaje logics': a variety of strategies of racial differentiation that permeate social life. Such racist logics, when translated into the realm of the everyday in Mexico, have meant that racism is lived as a constant feature that has been normalized. Racism has lost its explicit links with its processes of formation, and has therefore gone unrecognised. Knight discusses how in Mexico some authorities have denied the existence of racism due to the conscious efforts of the political elites to homogenise a sense of nation in a rather complex and heterogeneous society since the Revolution of 1910. However, he writes, 'racism did not wither on the vine. Against the confident obituaries of Mexican racism (...) we could set more sombre estimates of an "omnipresent dimension" of racism in Mexican society, or of a "profoundly racist ideology"' (Knight 1990, 99). Building on Knight's understanding of the 'omnipresent dimension' of racism we can understand this spread of racism in everyday life as being of *distributed intensity* which means, as will become clearer, that people a) do not recognize racism as such; b) experience racism as commonplace throughout society and in their own lives, lowering the perceived gravity of its effects; and c) express and feel racism in moments of greater intensity where specific social configurations allow the *racist moment* to emerge and be expressed.

Before continuing with the unpacking of the characteristics of racism's distributed intensity, let us consider mestizaje in more depth and relate it to Goldberg's (2002) notion of racelessness, as a way of conceptualising the specificity of racial politics in

Mexico. I will then draw on empirical research to exemplify how racism *works* in a raceless context, that is, how the racist logics of everyday life operate through racist moments. Finally I will explore how such processes of racialisation produce a particular experience of whiteness.

Mestizaje in a Raceless Context

Throughout the nineteenth century, a period of nation-building all over Latin America, the ideology of mestizaje became the founding cornerstone and 'trajectory for the formation' (Wade 2001, 849) of the new nations. While it brought forward an earlier colonial use, mainly as miscegenation, in this period the notion *also* incorporated cultural and moral processes of inclusion while giving substance to the national subject, the mestiza. As such an ideology, mestizaje has

a democratic inclusive aspect (...) which holds out the promise of improvement through race mixture for individuals and for the nation: everyone can be a candidate for mixture and hence moral and social uplifting. At the same time, of course, it is a deeply discriminatory ideology and practice, since it is based on the idea of the inferiority of blacks and indigenous peoples and, in practice, of discrimination against them (Wade 2001, 849).

Mestizaje was also a racial counter-discourse, promoted by the ruling elites, to ideas of purity and 'white' hegemonic discourses emanating from European and US scientific racism, social Darwinism and eugenics. Whitening in this context comes to embody the process of homogenization represented by mestizaje (Goldberg 2009, 219). Such varied and simultaneous meanings of mestizaje, which did not follow in succession but were rather accumulated, seem to pass unrecognised in contemporary Mexico. So, if throughout the colonial period (1521-1810) the

perception of the mestiza/o² as a 'bastard' prevailed, marked within the structure of the caste system, by Independence and initial nation-building period (1810-1910), mestiza identity shifted towards being considered both an achieved *and* an ascribed status (Knight 1990). This lasted until the Revolution of 1910 when Indígena cultures were 'rehabilitated' (González Navarro 1970, 145). It is at this point that mestiza identity was 'imposed' to all inhabitants as the preferred subject of national identity, ideologically reconstructed to create a new sense of nation. The all-encompassing mestiza identity was now framed in terms of national belonging, it was 'the' Mexican and the bonds of Mexicanness that were thereafter persistently (re)created.

Although racial signifiers in Mexico have been transformed by the perception of mestizaje throughout time, as well as by the effect of social stratification along class lines, the colonial importance of hierarchy and caste had lasting effects. As Goldberg argues 'this flux in whiteness (...) is what mark the racial imaginary of Latin America, (...) as largely unique' (2009, 216). Overall, racial discourses have throughout time, up to this contemporary period, faded away behind national, cultural and economic explanations of social hierarchies and as a consequence, their effects have been somehow masked. What we are facing in contemporary Mexico is a complex social organisation that has hidden and grown different forms of racisms. In this context old colonial racial categories remain and 'passing' towards 'whiteness' –in its peculiar Mexican version-, is still a goal for the inhabitants, a problematic area in terms of identity, and a non-spoken rule of social stratification. Although problematic and incomplete, the equation between mestiza/o and Mexican has denied the dynamics of racism and discrimination that are lived throughout all the society *including* this population group. The mestiza/o population, urban and rural, is positioned as the pinnacle of the discourse of an ethnically homogenised and racially undifferentiated society. Such national coherent identification is the one all must aspire to belong, including Indígena, Afro-Mexicans and other minority migrant groups (Roma people, Chinese, Jews, etc.) that do not 'pass' as the idealised 'white'

² Mestiza/o, deriving from the process of mestizaje, denotes a person, thing or practice (female, ending in 'a', or male, ending in 'o') that is considered culturally or racially mixed. It is both a noun and adjective.

ones. It is my argument then, that Mexico has produced a raceless social context where people are not recognised as racialised subjects but live through the consequences and everyday presence of racism and its distributed intensity. Racelessness (Goldberg 2002) is here understood as a process of racial and racist normalization that acts in such a way that allows Mexican people to express and be convinced by the commonly spread idea that in Mexico there is no racism because we are all 'mixed'. This association between a racial identity and an equality status has been oversimplified in its rationale. This is why this article focuses on the mestizas/os and their everyday life; those who are not questioned or problematised enough, the ones that emerge as point of reference to speak of the 'other' and are considered, by others and themselves, as 'the' Mexicans.

For Goldberg, in his analysis of the United States racial relations, racelessness refers to the absence 'of formal racial invocation from state agency and state personality' (2002:261), while at the same time certain dynamics of social, economic and political life are fashioned by racial understandings. This particular position of the state allows it to structure racelessness while denying its responsibility towards the impact of such racial shaping. 'Racelessness, in short, traded on the fact that race became so readily, one might say universally, assumed' (2002, 257). The relevance of the notion of 'racelessness' and Goldberg's analysis of the U.S. is useful to frame Mexico's lack of public discourse on racism and an endemic denial that seems to be caught in between a commitment to formal equality and the uncritical reproduction of state rationality regarding 'race'. De la Cadena, similarly to Knight, argues that in Latin America it is common to confront 'the relative ease with which pervasive and very visible discriminatory practices coexist with the denial of racism' (2001, 16). For her, it is the racialisation of Latin American culture that has enabled the 'denied' reproduction of racist practices. The discourse denies racism but upholds cultural differences. This is how we can explain that racist practices actively invade people's lives despite the professed absence of racism in Mexican culture. The effectiveness of these practices relies on their capacity to normalise certain social conditions as well as ways of thinking and acting. This is the core of the notion of 'racelessness' that I argue characterizes Mexican 'social configurations'.

What I want to propose here is that the key elements to understand how racist practices operate in Mexico are threefold: a) the ideology of mestizaje and racism's distributed intensity and omnipresent dimension in both cultural and historical terms, expressed in a variety of daily practices that have profound effects on people's life experience; b) the coexistence of a variety of definitions of mestizaje within discourses of racial mixing and official and nationalistic governmental policies that allow the existence of a 'raceless' social configuration; and c) the ways in which the Mexicans relate to what I have called, mestizaje logic or racist logic, that is, the logics of prejudice that permeate the social collective and are characterized by their invisibility and all-pervasiveness.

To explore these elements, we will now consider some examples of the *quality* of contemporary practices of racism in Mexico. I will draw on a piece of research that explored the ideas and experiences of a group of women about racism, mestizaje and national identity, through focus group discussions and life-story interviews based on family photographs (Moreno Figueroa 2006). The sample included forty Mexican women between the ages of 18 and 55, living in three Mexican cities – Huajuapán, León and Mexico City- engaged in a variety of activities, including, for example, academics, designers, political activists, civil servants, housewives, rural teachers, photographers, lawyers and journalists. Their stories give us an exploratory picture of 'how racism feels' in Mexico today; what it means in everyday life and how has 'the national' rendered invisible its own racialised and racialising elements and processes.

Racist Logics and Distributed Intensities

If racism exists, a pertinent question is: how does it exist in a context that denies it? What does this denial do? Overall, racism in Mexico has been usually understood as acts of exclusion and discrimination that 'somehow' happen mainly to the Indígena communities and mostly to 'black' people abroad ('in the USA'). In the discussion generated amongst the participants, terms such as 'discrimination' and 'class

difference' were used alongside 'racism', with both overlapping and complementary meanings. This could justly be considered a result of the vagueness of the term 'racism' itself. Here is an extract from a discussion in Mexico City with Lucía and Montserrat about the definition of 'racism'.

Lucía: For me racism is to make the differences in colour and race evident or clear in a pejorative, painful way... and in other things too, like age, class, gender, all the rest... But racism, in particular, is about people's race, colour or features.

Montserrat: I would add that in the city racism by class is more obvious than racism by colour or race. In this city, at least a large percentage, we are the product of the same race; I mean we are all Mexicans. But as soon as, for example, someone has more money within that same race, there is racism because of class.

Lucía: Initially it's about which race you are, but there is also racism within a race, isn't there? If one person is whiter than the other or has curly hair and the other straight hair. It's also about the features and the colour of the skin. I believe that in Mexico if we see a person who has very clearly Indígena features... I don't know how to say it... less on 'this' side... there is also discrimination because of that, and people will say: 'he is a 'naco' (naff), he is an 'Indio', even because of the way you dress...

This extract vividly demonstrates the changeable and flexible understandings of racism, shared by the majority of the Mexican population. Although I am only presenting Lucia's and Montserrat's opinions here, in the various focus groups I conducted 'racism' clearly appeared to refer to a form of discrimination, and for most participants it related to giving less value to one person due to physical characteristics in comparison to others. Lucía also suggests that, racism is something that happens in relation to other issues such as age, class and gender. Yet racism has its own specificity, which she defines in relation to people's physical features and skin colour.

For Montserrat, the issue of class is particularly relevant, and she even affirms that, at least in the context of Mexico City, racism is linked to the economic status people have, which is not necessarily related to any kind of physical feature. Her intervention demonstrates the difficulty of having an unambiguous definition for, and uses of, concepts such as 'race' ('we are the product of the same race; I mean we are all Mexicans') and 'class' (which is about 'having more money'); as well as the theoretical carefulness needed if 'importing' these definitions, especially from the UK or USA.

The idea of privilege and the racist logic structured by mestizaje is crucially signalled by Lucía's comment about 'Indígena features' being 'less on "this" side'. It is noticeable the shifts in position that she goes through in different situations. In an example that I will look at below, Lucía talks of herself as somebody who has been ill treated by her relatives because of her features and skin colour. Nevertheless, above she locates herself in this non-defined space of the 'others' who are not Indígenas. Lucía is talking as if the criteria for determining what features define an Indígena are completely certain, and she definitely locates herself 'on "this" side'. Which side is that? What are the features of the people on 'this side'? I argue that 'this side' is one of the possibilities that mestiza identity has brought: its flexibility and juxtaposition with the subject of national identity. 'This side' is the one that has the privilege of naming the other 'who has very clearly Indígena features'. Those who locate themselves as Mexicans have learned to see and praise Indígena peoples as an essential and vital part of the national culture and landscape, giving 'sense' and depth to Mexican history, but they do not seem to have any desire to 'look' like them.

In a context where a normalisation of the space of racial privilege is in operation, the mestizo body is able, *at times*, to occupy the safety of 'this side'. This is how the effectiveness of the racist practices in Mexico is based in the capacity of making ordinary and already available specific social conditions, as well as forms of thinking and acting. A foucauldian approach will argue that

[t]here is logic to practices. There is a push towards a strategic objective but no one is pushing. The objective emerged historically, taking particular forms and encountering specific obstacles, conditions and resistances. The overall effect, however, escaped the actor's intentions, as well as those of anybody else (1982, 187).

This is exactly how the practices of racism operate: in relation to a racist logic that has emerged historically and has been able to detach itself from specific explicit content. It is not necessary to know, talk about or question what 'race', processes of racialisation or racial ideologies are. Racism has its own life and the privilege of *mestizaje* emerges as the national norm. It is possible now to understand the first two characteristics of the *distributed intensity* in Mexico's everyday life racist logic: firstly, that the recognition of racism cannot be taken for granted, it is neither a given assumption or a clearly identifiable situation and, secondly, that such difficulty of discerning what racism is allows people to experience it as commonplace throughout society and in their own lives, lowering the perceived gravity of its effects. Consider, for example, Consuelo's account:

I know about these things from my mother. She says that her aunts, who she lived with, would say: "oh no, he is so ugly, very dark". I do remember that they thought my father was really dark [and] that it was terrible to get married to a dark-coloured person instead of improving one's class. My grandmother has a brother who is very, very *moreno*³, and he married a woman who's got very dark skin, so all their children are really dark. They call them: *los morenos*. And they'd say: "how come he married her? Can't he see what she looks like?" And even nowadays, he's like 70 years old and his kids are in their 30s, they still ask him: "if you can see you're so dark, why did you marry such a dark woman?" They ask him why he didn't think about improving the race. Both families think the same: that becoming lighter

³ *Morena* is an adjective that refers to somebody with 'brown' or darker skin colour in comparison to others.

means improving, as if all of them were so blond. None of them are blond. I think that's why I have this thing...

"Why he didn't think about improving the race?" is the key question, pointing to how 'race' and transformation are thought of as possible through specific strategies, mainly marriage. If there is an idea of improvement, there is also an idea of something defective, flawed, corrupted, that is/was spoiled, that can perhaps be 'better', 'refined', 'whiter', 'beautiful'. It is not difficult to perceive the implications of the negative perception that being mestiza/o has, and at the same time it is also possible to perceive the fluidity of the mestizaje process, which can be thought of as a better option than remaining on the 'other side' of the continuum, the side of the Indígena and the 'black'. Consuelo says her relatives think that 'becoming lighter means improving'. The discourse of improving one's appearance and achieving fairer skin colour, occurs without making explicit links to the notions of 'race' that underpin it or to how those understandings have come into being. What a racist logic does is to disconnect the personal experience of racism from the broader social context that reproduces it and also to erase the links with its historical process of formation. In this way, the racist logic distributes the intensity of racism to become bearable and quotidian. When operating through such logic, racism loses its name and its referents, racism is distributed in everyday life becoming 'just how things are'.

Racist Moments, Mestizaje Moments

A third element of the process of racism's distributed intensity is the 'racist moment', or the 'mestizaje moment' for the Mexican case. This refers to the moments when racism is expressed, noticed, talked about or sensed in a different level of intensity that makes it somehow recognisable. Racist moments are both an exception and a pointer of racism's distributed intensity. When I asked the participants to think of personal experiences that they could identify as racist, Samantha said:

If I suddenly see a man with very dark skin colour, very *moreno*, although I'm very *morena* myself, I think something like... "Oh... what's this guy up to?" Yes I've done it, looked down on, rejected people that are very dark. And I've experienced it myself when going to clubs, for example, because I'm *morenita* and short, that it's more difficult to get in than if I was *güera*⁴ or taller...

Samantha's extract is striking because it reveals one of the fundamental contradictions of the racist experience. While she locates the 'man with very dark skin colour', within the traditional stereotype that a dark(er) man must be 'up to' something, Samantha then recognises her own resemblance to that *moreno* man. So, within the racist logics in operation in Mexico, racism's distributed intensity allows a pervasive positioning in the various shifting places and possibilities of the racist dynamic. This positioning is not the one of 'victimised perpetrators', but more accurately points to people's everyday engagement with specific moments where intensity is not only distributed but also increased. It is precisely such increment or heightened visibility that enables contradictions to be evidenced, aligning understandings and perceptions, and allowing the racist moment, which is already available, to occur in a more present, palpable way. Thus, racist events, or *mestizaje* moments, are not a matter of action and reaction or of perpetrators and victims, but dynamic relations embedded within historically produced racial discourses.

The distributed intensity of racism is shifting, perverse and ambivalent: people move within the racist dynamic and, in the cases analysed here, women embody the tensions of the racist experience. Such racist moments reveal how people have learned to live with such intensity: people distinguish themselves from others racially while making themselves raceless. Mexican's concern with skin colour reflects the importance of a sense of relational and contextual visibility and the unspoken shared cultural understandings implied at the points where notions of

⁴ *Güera* is an adjective that refers to somebody considered to be whiter and/or blonder and/or having fairer or lighter skin colour (in comparison to others).

mestizaje and official nationalism are finely entangled. Let us look at one further example:

I have a strong memory of a story that my parents tell me... I don't have photographs of myself when I was born because I was born black, that's what my parents tell me: 'you were born so black... so *prieta*⁵ that we didn't take photographs of you. So we were waiting, because also you were born a little bit ugly, and black, so we waited for you to grow up a little bit till you got better and changed'. And the other thing I want to say, because I've done it, is that once, I think it was in the airport, there was a black guy sweating, a lot. You know what I thought immediately? Something like: 'he's going to get his shirt dirty...' I swear, it seemed like he was going to stain it... Then, suddenly, I surprised myself... but it was like a thought... I didn't even say it. I know it's something very ugly but I thought it.

Lucía talks about the embodiment of tensions racism provokes in people's lives. She relates a story about what is like to be in the midst of racism's distributed intensity. Lucía hears (maybe continuously throughout her life) a family story about the desire for 'other' features and skin colour, for not preserving images and hoping for change and transformation. When she then has this encounter at the airport she elaborates a version of the ideas learnt about herself. Lucía's recognition of these two events, this racist moments, within the context of the interview, allow us to understand how she lives the contradictions generated by mestizaje's social and historical legacy of mixture and improvement, which has survived to the present in renewed and subtle ways. It is the distributed intensity of racism, its permanent presence and readiness what makes evident the paradoxes faced by Lucía and Samantha. While it is important to contextualise how racism cuts across all aspects of social life, it is also crucial to call for agency, and offer a space for accountability and responsibility. So yes, they are racists *and* they are not. They live in a racist state of play that both

⁵ *Morena* and *prieta* are very similar in their meaning (somebody with 'brown' skin, or having darker-than other's skin colour), although *prieta* could be used in a pejorative way depending on the intonation, which in this case is meant to be offensive.

constrains *and* allow them to be on the safe 'side'; that both includes and excludes (Wade 2005). The distributed intensity of racism is expressed 'at times' and its visibility is only a glimpse that recedes into *ordinariness* and *normality*. Thus, an artificial situation such as the focus group discussion brings the racist moments to the fore and highlights their 'intensity'.

The two examples given by Lucía, where she locates herself as being in 'this' side and the last one, where she is able to be in the position of interpreting and judging the man about to 'stain' his shirt with the colour that will 'wash off' with his sweat, frame an understanding of the site of the mestiza/o as one of ambiguous whiteness. This is to what we turn now.

Mestizaje and Whiteness

The racist experience in Mexico and the relations between Indígena peoples, Afro-Mexicans and mestizas, could be explored under the framework of recent critical studies on whiteness (for example Ahmed 2004a, 2007, Ferber 2007, Frankenberg 2004, Nayak 2007, Ware and Back 2002). Such studies have shifted the focus towards trying to locate and make visible the privilege of whiteness that is sometimes misleadingly only attached to 'white' bodies. This is important as not all 'white bodies' have been recognised as occupying the space of whiteness, of privilege, due to the specific historical junctions of social categories such as labour, class, gender, education, taste. For example, think of Jews and Irish people in their migration history to the United States, the categorisation of white working class people in both the US and the UK as 'white trash' or the 'brown-skinned white girls' Twine wrote about (1997). For the case of this article, the possibly *darker* skin tones of the mestiza/o, which nevertheless can vary enormously, does not ultimately have the last word in determining if this group can or cannot (consistently) occupy the space of racial privilege, of whiteness.

According to Nayak (2007), whiteness is the reference point by which many of our ideas of citizenship and human rights are measured. He explores the possibilities of

regarding 'whiteness less a matter of skin pigmentation and more as an organising principle in late modernity' (2007, 738). In his terms, at the core of critical whiteness studies is the conviction that 'whiteness is a modern invention; it has changed over time and place (...) [it] is a social norm and has become chained to an index of unspoken privileges [and] the bonds of whiteness can yet be broken/deconstructed for the betterment of humanity' (2007, 738). Trying to make use of this framework for the Mexican case is not quite straightforward. For example, Ferber (2007), as others before her, refers to whiteness as the social location of privilege which is in direct relation to oppression. For Ferber, then, oppressed people in the United States know they are oppressed and are confronted by it, all the time, while the privileged ones are unaware of how such position impacts their lives. As explored in the previous section, it is a different scenario in Mexico. On the one hand, there is a sense that privilege mainly relates to the space of the Mexican mestiza, albeit the whiter one, and this is seen as what is the expected norm. However, on the other, following the interviewees' accounts, it is clear that they are quite aware about the location they do not want to occupy: they know they would rather be on 'this side'. Whiteness appears then as a social norm that is relational and contextual, normalised and ambiguous. Mexican people can, at times, occupy the space of privilege, and, at others, due to relational readings, are located on the other 'side'. While Nayak argues that whiteness is a social norm that operates on the basis of its unremarkability and ordinariness, many Mexicans are able to clearly perceive the pitfalls and advantages of their racialised social positions and moreover, the limitations of their bodies. Similarly, Ahmed is wary of the insistence on whiteness as merely invisible, unseen or unmarked (Dyer 1997, Frankenberg 1993). For her,

Whiteness is only invisible for those who inhabit it. For those who don't, it is hard; it even seems everywhere. Seeing whiteness is about living its effects, as effects that allow white bodies to extend into spaces that have already taken their shape, spaces in which black bodies stand out, stand apart, unless they pass, which means passing through space by passing as white (2004a, paragraph 1).

The paradox is that for the Mexican case, the mestiza/o body shifts from privilege to standing out or apart, as Lucía and Samatha's accounts above show. Privilege is available to the ones that inhabit whiteness, but it can easily be taken away because such inhabiting is precarious. While mestizaje is all about the possibility of passing, of engaging in processes of whitening, and of positioning oneself – if at all possible – on 'this side', it is also this same possibility what gives to the experience of whiteness in Mexico its ambiguous quality. Nayak points out how various historians, like Roediger (1991, 1994), have already shown that people who were deemed 'not-yet-white' in one epoch may 'become' white in another. However, for the Mexican case, we not only need to 'rethink whiteness beyond corporeal limitations' (Nayak 2007, 743), but to consider the specificity of mestiza/o bodies and the different strategies they can use to inhabit privilege within a wide range of intersections with class and gender, *and* their shifting temporalities and relational visibility.

If whiteness is not necessarily attached to the 'white' body but to a site of privilege, it is not difficult to see how being able to occupy the space of the mestiza/o is paramount. While there are Mexicans who could physically embody European ideas of the 'white' body, overall, they will occupy that space in a fleeting and relational way. Skin colour, body features and privilege, are attached to each other, but not in a fixed pre-given manner. They also appear and are perceived differently according to the circumstances and the specific people involved. I have discussed elsewhere (Moreno Figueroa 2006, 2008) how this relationality works mainly as a daily exercise of comparison and self-assessment. Here, what I want to highlight is how this relationality makes the attainment of whiteness contextual: depending where, when and with whom you are, a certain space of whiteness as privilege may or may not be occupied.

'White', then, has been used as a racial category and as a location of power and privilege which acts as the measure for 'other', without clarifying what 'whiteness' means and represents. Mestizaje in Mexico can be understood like Frankenberg's whiteness, as "a site of elaboration of a range of cultural practices and identities, often unmarked and unnamed, or named as national or 'normative' rather than

specifically racial” (2004, 113). Just as the category of ‘white’ only seems to appear in relation to ‘other’ racialised groups, the attribution of ‘mestiza/o’ also only appears in relation to Indígena and Afro-Mexican peoples and cultures (and this might be even further applicable to all the other groups that have migrated to the country).

Naming Mestizaje: Racialising Mexican identity

To conclude, let us link these racist logics with its distributed intensity and the context of racelessness to thinking about mestizaje as a form of whiteness. The following extract derives from a discussion about the (im)possibility of naming oneself as mestiza/o, that is, of racialising Mexican identity:

María: And why don’t you identify as mestiza, but you do as Mexican?

Rocío: It’s not that there’s a difference, they are two things, two different aspects.

Carmen: I didn’t say that, I’ve never said that I don’t identify as mestiza, of course I identify as mestiza.

María: But do you name yourself as mestiza? I mean what are you? mestiza?

Carmen: I’ve never had the need to name myself.

This last phrase is informative: “I’ve never had the need to name myself”. This reveals the possibility of the traps of mestizaje and its racist logic that is located between, on the one hand, not needing to name ourselves (insofar as we are located within the limits of the Mexican state and nationhood), and, on the other, living in a social space that names us in other ways, that visibly mark us and that has been permeated by racist understandings and practices.

In this sense mestizaje operates as complex form of whiteness, that is, as a normative privileged location of identity that is normalised and ambiguous. When mestizaje became ‘the national’, its characterisation as historically racialised *and* national became blurred and the national prevailed, dominated, pervaded and

consolidated a shift towards racelessness. The lack of public debate around the logics and politics of racism, make of its experience one of the most elusive and normalised practices, disconnected from its historical formation and social relevance. Identifying oneself as racialised is problematic be it either mestiza, Indígena, Afro-Mexican, or even 'white', due to a raceless context that does not match national identity with the prevailing racial inequalities and the effects of racist practices. Nevertheless, while mestizaje offers the possibility of flexible inclusion it also allows an everyday experience of racism that continues to privilege processes of whitening alongside notions of whiteness and uses the national discourse, such as a 'Mexican' identity, to cover up and render invisible processes of discrimination and social exclusion.

This article has offered a critical analysis of the racist practices that cut across the imaginary of what being 'Mexican' is, focusing on the ambiguity of whiteness as an expression of racism. Such a critical revision of racism embraces the contradictions produced by a public discourse that has disassociated racist practices and the need for its recognition from the concept of 'race' and its historical development. While this article emphasizes the need to make racism a public problem in Mexico, it also contributes to the polemic about the complexity of the racist experience, and elaborates on new venues that help us theorize and understand the workings of contemporary racism.

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